BOOKS

16 FEB 81
HARTFORD
ADVOCATE

A Most Horrifying How-Done-It

***Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy,* by David Lifton. Macmillan, 1981. 746 pages. $16.95.**

By Andrew Liddell

"A simple matter of a bullet through the head," was White House physician Admiral George Burkley's description of President John F. Kennedy's fatal head wound on the afternoon of November 22, 1963.

At a 1:30 p.m. press conference at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Presidential Press Secretary Malcolm Kilduff told reporters, "It is my understanding that it (a bullet) entered the temple, in the right temple."

The doctors who attended the dying President said he was shot from the front. They described a bullet entrance wound in the President's throat and a bullet exit wound about the size of a small fist between the right ear and the back of the head. They noticed that part of the cerebellum, the lower rear part of the brain, was damaged and protruding through the wound.

The autopsy report, however, tells a completely different story.

Concluding that the president was shot from behind instead of from the front, the report describes two bullet entrance wounds, one in back of the neck and the other in back of the head, that were not observed by any of the doctors and nurses in Dallas. The hole in the right rear of the head (measuring between two and three inches across) moved to the top of the head and increased to about four times its original size. The throat entrance wound over which the Dallas doctors made a one inch tracheotomy incision turned into a two-inch wide bullet exit wound "with widely gaping, irregular edges."

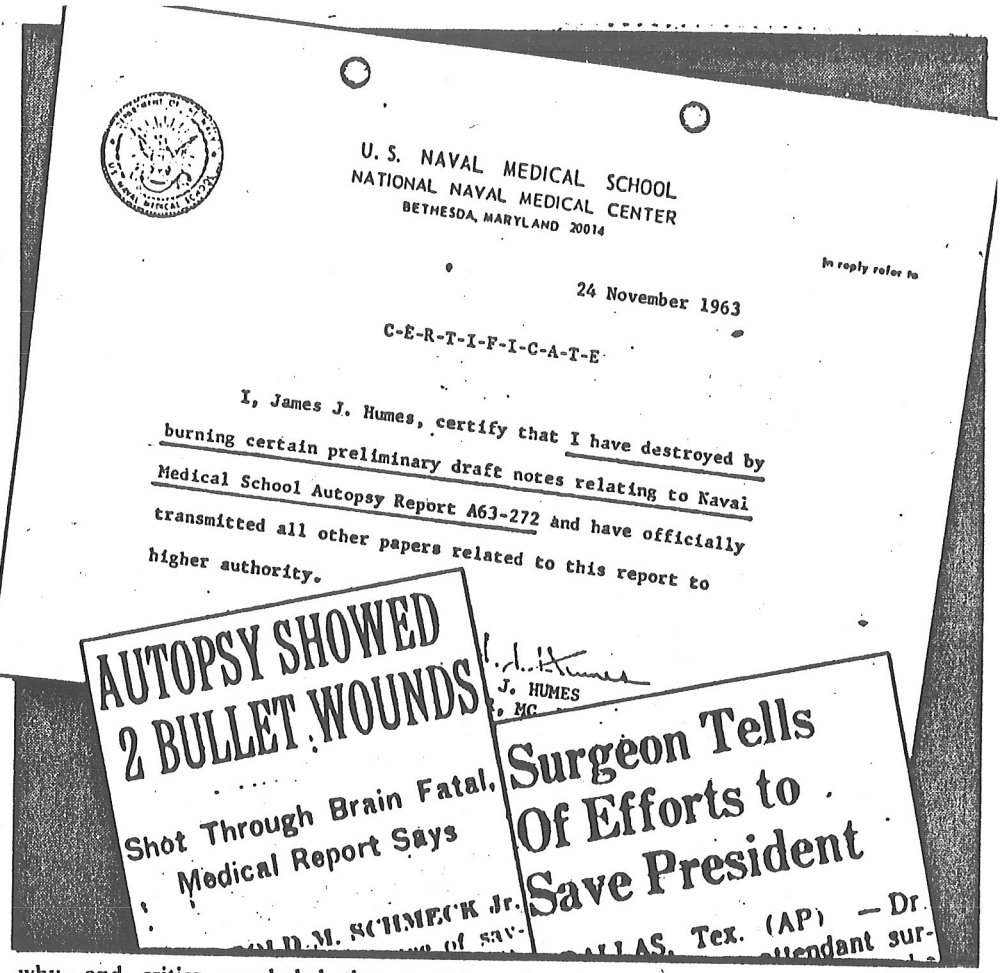
The ostensible autopsy x-rays and photographs on file in the National Archives present still another different version: the exit wound in the head had moved still further forward, the entrance wound in back of the head climbed four inches and the ~~front~~ back wound dropped about two inches.

Admiral Burkley's remark about a simple matter of a bullet through the head takes on an ironic cast he hadn't intended in light of these glaring discrepancies in the three separate descriptions of President Kennedy's wounds.

The irony of Burkley's matter-of-fact statement is that it was, after all, a simple matter. The exact location and nature of President Kennedy's bullet wounds should have been easy to establish.

The fact that different conclusions have been reached about the wounds has prompted critics for years to charge that the medical evidence was falsified in order to conceal shots fired from the front.

Critics took note of autopsy surgeon Commander James Humes' Warren Commission testimony that he burned a draft of the autopsy report at home "in the fireplace of my recreation room—with none of the Commission members asking him why—and critics concluded that a conspiracy to fudge the autopsy conclusions began with the thin column of smoke that went up Hume's chimney.



U. S. NAVAL MEDICAL SCHOOL
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BETHESDA, MARYLAND 20014

In reply refer to

24 November 1963

C-E-R-T-I-F-I-C-A-T-E

I, James J. Humes, certify that I have destroyed by burning certain preliminary draft notes relating to Naval Medical School Autopsy Report A63-272 and have officially transmitted all other papers related to this report to higher authority.

J. HUMES
, MC

AUTOPSY SHOWED 2 BULLET WOUNDS

Shot Through Brain Fatal, Medical Report Says

...D.M. SCHMECK Jr.

Surgeon Tells Of Efforts to Save President

...LAS, Tex. (AP) — Dr. ...ttendant sur-

However, in a 700-page book published last month by Macmillan, long-time Warren Commission report critic David Lifton claims the falsification process began earlier with secret surgery on the President's wounds before the body reached the autopsy table.

According to Lifton, the dead President was stolen from the casket aboard Air Force One during Lyndon Johnson's swearing-in ceremony. While television cameras filmed the return home of Air Force One and the unloading of the now-empty casket onto a Navy ambulance, the stolen corpse inside a rubber body bag was secreted out another door on the other side of the plane and flown by Army helicopter to Walter Reed Army Hospital. After the wounds were altered to conceal shots from the front, the body was rushed to Bethesda Naval Hospital for the official autopsy.

Lifton's investigation into the alteration of President Kennedy's wounds began in 1966 with his discovery of shocking information in a report by two FBI agents who attended the autopsy. It was "apparent," the agents said, that there had been "surgery of the head area, namely in the top of the skull."

After telephoning the Dallas doctors to find out that no such surgery was performed in Dallas, Lifton re-examined the doctor's reports and testimony and conducted his own study into standard autopsy procedures in his search for evidence of prior surgery.

Going back to the head wound, Lifton noticed in a diagram of Kennedy's head sketched during the autopsy a four by six

See Evidence Page 28

Andrew Liddell has a long-standing interest in the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

16 FEB 81

Evidence

(*Continued from Page 22*)

inch section on top of the head labeled as "missing."

Humes had told the Warren Commission the wound was so large he was able to remove the brain from the cranium without having to perform any of the extensive surgical procedures normally required for such an operation, given the dimensions and location of the head wound as had been reported in Dallas.

The brain, according to Humes, had a "parasagittal laceration" from the "tip of the occipital lobe to the tip of the frontal lobe." In layman's terms, this is a front-to-back cut at about ear-level through the middle of the brain. This lengthwise cut through the brain was most likely caused by a clandestine scalpel sectioning the brain for bullets than by bullets themselves, Lifton argues.

In his account of a discussion he had with Warren Commission staff lawyer Wesley Liebler while in graduate school at UCLA, Lifton recalls Liebler reciting the post-mortem description of Kennedy's brain injury to a neurosurgeon over the telephone and then watching Liebler's jaw drop after the surgeon guessed such a brain wound could have been caused by an axe.

The final stage of inquiry for Lifton was the chain of possession of the President's body between the assassination and the Bethesda autopsy. By tracking down and interviewing medical and military personnel—a quest made possible by the House Assassinations Committee in 1978 when it lifted the Navy's 15-year old gag order forbidding persons involved to discuss the autopsy—Lifton was able to reconstruct a bizarre pattern of events that include two of everything—two ambulances, two caskets, two entrances of the Dallas casket into the morgue and finally two casket openings in the autopsy room.

A Coffin Chase

One of the most flagrant examples of foul play that evening was a 7:05 coffin chase. Lifton presents in his book separate interviews with members of the military honor guard assigned to stay with the casket who reported that it took off at high speed in the back of a Navy ambulance at the front entrance of the morgue. Honor guard members told Lifton they followed the speeding ambulance in a pickup truck but lost it in traffic. Nearly an hour later it turned up at the morgue's rear entrance.

About 15 minutes before the ambulance drove off with the casket, Chief Hospital Corpsman Dennis David said he watched a black unmarked hearse unload a plain grey casket which was carried into the morgue by men in civilian clothes. Three other witnesses corroborated his observation that the President's body arrived in a rubber body bag inside a plain metal shipping casket. In Dallas, the body was wrapped in white sheets and placed in a ceremonial bronze casket.

Lifton concludes that the ~~conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy~~ assassination was an inside job. The plot, he says, was hatched inside the executive branch of the United States government instead of in Moscow or in Havana or solely in the twisted mind of a lone leftist. The prime suspects in Lifton's scenario include members of the Secret Service who had control of the body and members of the military who had control of the autopsy.

However, Lifton does not present a list of names, nor does he assign a motive to the crime. "The book is a how done-it, not a who done-it or a why done-it," the 40-year-old freelance writer said in a recent interview.

The answers to the last two questions, he claims, can only be arrived at through an official investigation to collect sworn testimony from all medical and military personnel connected with the autopsy proceedings and to determine the identities of the Secret Service agents who went with the president to Dallas and of those agents who attended the autopsy.

Until such an investigation, all that remains, like the smile on the Cheshire cat, are three conflicting versions of what was done by the bullets that took John Kennedy's life. □

(CORRECTIONS BY THE AUTHOR)